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Chiswick Hospital

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Chiswick Hospital

Abstract

-Sylvia River, open your eyes and look at me. I need to check your blood pressure again. Are you still dreaming? -The doctor said we must get her out of the anaesthetic. She opens her eyes but she can't speak. Speak to her again. -You've been semi-conscious since yesterday. You're due for a painkiller in fifteen minutes. Would you like it now? It will hurt for a bit. No more drugs. I gave the frogs chloroform. -What did she say? -Something about chloroform. Careful, don't touch her tubes. - I can hear Miss K. -What did she say? -She's delirious. -

JAN LO SHINEBOURNE

Chiswick Hospital

-Sylvia River, open your eyes and look at me. I need to check your blood pressure again. Are you still dreaming?-

-The doctor said we must get her out of the anaesthetic. She opens her eyes but she can't speak. Speak to her again.-

-You've been semi-conscious since yesterday. You're due for a painkiller in fifteen minutes. Would you like it now? It will hurt for a bit.-

No more drugs. I gave the frogs chloroform.

-What did she say?-

-Something about chloroform. Careful, don't touch her tubes.-

I can hear Miss K.

-What did she say?-

-She's delirious.-

Say thanks to Father Mason for putting a blessing on you.

-I can't understand a word, can you? It sounds like pidgin English.-

Miss K, the voodoo priestess put something, the good voodoo, wrapped in a handkerchief in a corner of the bed. It is supposed to make me get better. She says, good herbs chile to make you get better. This is no voodoo.

-Can't you hear how distressed she is? Somebody wake her.-

Miss K is saying, you need a good African burial to give your jumbie peace. A Christian burial is no use to our jumbies.

Miss K can say Hindu prayers too, do puja. Only she can bury me the Indian and African way, no Christian ways. Bring the hearse to put the corpse in ice. Let Sadhu come and tell me again that when I die the quicker I forget my body the better, that cremation is better than burial for shukshma sharira.-

-What is shukshma sharira Sadhu?-

-That is the four functions of your mind Beti, and the winds of your body, and your five working organs and five knowledge organs.-

Mother is saying: -Sadhu is a heathen. Let him go and live in India if he wants to be an Indian. This is the West Indies, we are British. You will have an English funeral, so that you can go to heaven. Call Father Mason to preach a good sermon for you and bury you with holy water. You must die a Christian.-

In my dreams, I see Mother moving from one room to another. Each room is different. Each is a different continent. Her spirit is wandering because

Father Mason gave her communion wine and the body of Christ. She is not in Heaven because Sadhu and Miss K did not get to bury her and put Dutch pennies on her eyes. She should not have let Father Mason put communion wine on the lips of her corpse. I need Dutch pennies for the eyes of my corpse so I will not wander. Miss K will put Dutch pennies on my eyes. Sadhu will put red tikka on my third eye. Send for Miss K.

She is dead.

When? Where?

Ten years ago, alone in her cottage in South America. Pass four culverts. Go to her. They did not give her a Christian burial. They were afraid to bury her. The voodoo spirits came and took her away.

Miss K, I have come for you to bury me. Look, nothing has changed. Twenty years I was away, come back dead and nothing changed. Miss K, I come. You look so young.

Oh my darling, you come to see me?

Yes, don't tell Mother. Don't tell Father Mason. They will want to bury me.

Don't worry about Mother. Mother is not here. She is dead. She died before you.

The anaesthetist said he is from Barbados so I tell him to go and call Miss K.

-All right darling, all right darling, I will go and get her, you just count to five and you will go to sleep and have real sweet dreams.-

No counting even, next thing I know, I am in the elevator, going back to the ward and smelling of chloroform and almost dead. We used chloroform to put frogs to sleep in the school laboratory before we cut them and they cut me.

-Who is Miss K? She keeps calling for Miss K.-

She is Miss Koko, Cromati. Father Mason tried to jail her.

-Sylvia, wake up. I have to take your blood pressure.-

This is a nurse. Concentrate. Wake yourself up. Live. This is a nurse. Open your eyes and look. Don't be afraid to open your eyes. No Dutch pennies for my eyes. I must not die without Dutch pennies for my eyes. This girl has no Dutch pennies for my eyes. But her eyes are blue like the Dutchman's eyes. She is his daughter. Tell her to go and ask him for Dutch pennies for my eyes. Her eyes are too blue. *Look out, Dutchman haunt Guyana. Dutchman left all his gold Dutch pennies buried in jars all over Guyana. If you find the pennies, never spend it. You must only use it to bury the dead or the blue-eye Dutchman will kill you.*

-Sylvia, you must keep your arm still. I am trying to take your blood pressure.-

-Your husband has gone home.-

Husbands are supposed to stay with their dead. You do not leave the dead on their own. You are supposed to sit up with the dead one night and one day. When Grandmother died, the whole family came from all over the

world and formed a circle round her bed for one night and one day. They never left her side.

-Why has he gone home?-

-She is speaking, at last. Call the matron! Call the doctor!-

-Sorry to wake you up again.-

They do not leave the dead alone to die in peace. They harass the dead.

-My back hurts.-

-Her back hurts. She wants something for pain.-

No more drugs. I reek of chloroform. Why are you giving me chloroform?

-Sick, sick.-

-Get her a bowl.-

-Pain.-

-I'm sorry but you can only have an injection for the pain every four hours. You can have a pill every two hours.-

-Hot.-

-Someone get her a fan! Tell the nurse to get her a fan. Sweat is pouring from her.-

No fan. Don't give me a fan. Uncle Darcus hung himself near his fan. He always sat in front of the fan. When he hung himself he kept the fan on. I don't want the fan. Take the fan away.

-Where am I?-

-She's coming out of the anaesthetic.-

-Hello dear, do you speak English?-

You must tell them you speak English. Make them know you understand them.

-Yes.-

-She's crying now. She's fully conscious now.-

-Sylvia, you're in intensive care. This afternoon the doctor will be down to see you.-

Now it is afternoon.

-Are you awake? The doctor has something to tell you.-

-I am sorry, but we must operate again this afternoon. We must do a special test immediately.-

Miss K says once they cut you you is no good no more. After all these white people never think about the soul. They only treat your body, cutting it up, cutting it up and they think it will live. Stupid people. They don't know to get better. You must dance till the spirit catch you and throw you down. How you can dance if they cut you up?

-No, not so soon, too soon.-

-I assure you, there is no danger.-

-Stand aside nurse!-

-Breathe in deeply and hold your breath!-

-Are you in pain?-

Blue-eye jumbie white girl, Dutchman daughter, go and bring the pennies for my eyes now.

-Yes.-

-Is it bad? Think of something nice.-

Too many voices.

-Take a deep breath. Nurse, stand aside.-

-I'll come back. Bear up now.-

The machine rumbles and clicks and too much pain.

-Thank you. Breathe normally.-

The blue-eyed nurse comes back. She puts her arm under my head.

-Think of something nice, the nicest thing that you've done. Go on, think about the thing that makes you happiest. What about swimming in the Caribbean sea? Imagine it.-

Jumbies don't like water. They are mud. Water will melt them.

-I know someone from the Caribbean, he's a nurse here. He's lovely. When were you last in the Caribbean? Are you still in pain?-

-Stand aside Nurse! Another deep breath and hold!-

-It's all right.-

Her voice ebbs and flows like water. Jumbie voice.

-Don't close your eyes. Look at me. Take deep, gentle breaths. I'm here. Try to relax. Is the pain bad?-

The jumbie grave is open.

The pain is too bad. I am dying. I can hear her voice, and Miss K's voice too.

-Doctor, she is in pain. It's the drain. You shut it off. Can I turn it on again?-

-We'll hurry. We need to take several pictures. We have to find the leak. We'll be as quick as we can.-

-Deep breath! Hold! Breathe! Deep breath! Hold! Breathe deeply! Deep breath! Hold! Breathe! Deep breath! Hold! Breathe! Two more, then it'll be over!-

I am in the jumbie grave now, drowning in it like Miss K says happens when you die and like the time Uncle Darcus threw me into the trench to make me swim. When my body hit the water, I thought I would bounce off it and be safe but it parted for me like cloth then next thing I know I am weightless, the water is soaking through me and I can see underwater the bodies of the other children who are swimming. Where are my brothers? My mother has sent them to tea at Father Mason while I am drowning and dying. Underwater it is not brown but grey. My eyes will die first because the water is hurting them. If I shut my eyes I won't see myself dying. When I die again I will shut my eyes so I can't see myself doing it. I get to the bottom of the water and my feet and hands touch the mud. It is soft soft mud, like mud at the bottom of the graves where the jumbies live, the kind of mud I would have had to live in if I died and let the jumbies put me in the grave. Fight the water and live. Move, move, move, push, push the water, push back the pain in the chest, in the head, until they come to save you, human hands like the white girl hands saving you now. Don't cry, not

now, not then. They were all laughing because they knew I nearly died. My eyes are open and I am living. Her face is there, not the water, not the ceiling.

Again she says look at me, keep my eyes open. I look and see her eyes blue blue blue blue blue blue like the midday sky at home and blue like Father Mason. Home is in her blue eyes. She tells me the sun is hot, I am at home. She tells me I am in the Caribbean. She tells me I am swimming in the sea, it is warm and comforting and relaxing in the water, she tells me I am at home, all my friends and family and the people I love are there. She wants me to live. She is afraid to see me die. She does not know how to let me die. How blue the sky in her eyes, how cool the breeze at home where I belong, how sad not to be at home if home is what she says it is. Her fingers brush my cheek. I am not fainting. I am going to sleep, like a baby. Like a mother, she is rocking and coaxing me to sleep. There is no pain. I am not dying. I lose the memory to fight. I let her hold my hand. I go to sleep. I take her hand with me to sleep, feeling safe to sleep.

* * *

I can hear the distant noises of other rooms and wards and offices in the hospital. I will leave this quiet room and return to my real life and remember everything. Turn. See? My head moves, it is alive. There is a nurse at a desk. Don't die, call the nurse.

-Nurse!-

Call again, -Nurse!-

She is coming.

-Yes?-

-I don't feel very well.-

She comes closer. -What is it my love?-

-I feel really bad.-

-Well it's not surprising, your insides have been handled twice now in two major operations in two days. We've been trying desperately to get you to come round.-

-What was this operation?-

-To repair your ureter. It was a reimplantation of the right ureter, near your bladder, it was leaking. They had to take you straight from the x-ray because you fainted while they were taking the pictures. You have had a lot of anaesthetic you know. You have been very delirious, talking and arguing with everybody, in a world of your own. You have been worrying us. You'll be all right now.-

The clock says three o' clock. I remember I had a mother who died. She died now, at three o' clock in the morning and the priest she believed in never once came to see her or give her the last rites. I am not dead yet. No mother, not time for you to come for me. That is what the people Father Mason called heathens used to say, that when it is time for me to die, my

mother will call me, I will see her and she will come for me. Not God, not Jesus, your mother. I mustn't sleep or else I will die and she and Father Mason will come for me. Stay awake, doze a little, wake again, doze again. Don't go to sleep and dream or you will die.

The feel of cold flannel on face. A blessing.

-Joanna?-

-Who is Joanna my darling baby girl?-

Another dream. Open my eyes. This is Miss K, leaning over me and smiling. Miss K why you take so long to come? They said you were dead.

-Miss K what you doing here?-

-Lord child, you could really talk in your sleep. All the time you talking. I can't understand you half the time and they send me because they say I will understand you. They say you talking West Indies. They say you talking voodoo. Careful chile or else they will lock you up. This is a Christian country. I will leave the bowl of water here and the flannel and come and wipe your face for you later. Where you from? I from Grenada.-

-I can't remember. Find out for me.-

-Look, right here your notes say you are a Christian and we should send for the priest. You dreaming. You calling in your sleep. Whole night you calling. Poor baby girl. Go back to sleep now. Is the anaesthetic. You had it plenty times. It will wear off and you will remember everything. Rest.-

Lights out. Blanket of sleep. Trolleys going by. Doctors. Silence. More trolleys. Silence. Noise. Marching. Noise of marching feet. Nurses coming and going. Trolleys and porters and corpses. Echoes. I look just like my mother as I die. She was lying in the most well made bed. The sheets and blanket looked as if they had been ironed round her.

* * *

-Hello. Wake up Sylvia. How're you feeling? I am sorry. We have to operate on you a third time. I'm the anaesthetist. Just another anaesthetic. Does anaesthetic affect you?-

-Your husband is here.-

When she was dying, Mother used to call for me, and they used to tell her: *Your daughter is coming*. I can remember I had a mother but I don't remember her face because she had no Dutch pennies for her eyes.

-What's this they're telling me about you having to go back to the theatre?-

A man with a sneer.

-My mind is getting straight.-

-This has nothing to do with your mind. It's about your body. Where is the doctor?-

-Yes sir, of course, I'll get the doctor.-

-Sylvia, we're going to give you your premed now.-

-Nurse Carew, would you like to do it?-

-I don't want more anaesthetic, again, so soon.-

-You're going to feel very drowsy now. Don't worry. I'm here. You can talk to me.-

Miss K you come thank god you come.

-She's doing it again, talking in that voice.-

-You're going to sleep now.-

-Listen to me. You're not going to die. And I'll be here when you get back from the theatre, and if I'm not on duty, I'll come and see you. I promise.-

-I say, Sylvia River? Is that your name? Nod if you can hear me. Wake up a bit. Is your name Sylvia River? Just checking you're who you're supposed to be. I'm just going to give you an injection now. It'll put you to sleep. Count to five.-

Pull me out of the dark hole where I am curled up like a foetus. No one hears me calling. The nurse who looks like Miss K is wearing her white uniform. She is walking in the hospital corridor. She is carrying a bowl of water for my face. I am calling her but my voice is choked in my throat like when Uncle Darcus threw me into the trench and I nearly drowned, like when Harold cut the priest's throat to stop him breathing. But I could hear them laughing kyah kyah kyah. I was in the water but I could still hear them. I want to get out. I smell of chloroform. Your mother is in a coma, come at once. I must get out. Push. Swim. Push. Once more. Push. The head is almost there. I can't push anymore. I'm dead. One more time. Your baby is ready. I want you to do the last stage breathing. Pant pant pant. Push hard when I say not before. I see the head. You are at home. The sky is blue in her eyes. The baby has black hair. Push. After you die you will be alive. Give her oxygen. Hold her tubes. Breathe. Pant. Push. Push. Come on. Yes yes yes yes yes. There we are, there.

-It's me, Joanna. Open your eyes and look at me.-

Send Miss K. Send for her to pull me out from the grave. Send her to tie my baby's navel string then bury it in the yard with all the family navel string. Her eyes are the colour of the sky at home, her hand is soft, too soft to cut the navel string. Miss K know how to cut the navel string.

-Pull me out.-

-Take my hand. I'm here. Let me wipe your face. You poor thing. You are having a difficult time. This was the last operation. Your ureter has been opened.-

My mother's womb opened again. I was born again.

-Keep still, or else you'll disconnect the tubes. You'll fall off the bed. Sister, I need help, she's rolling off the bed!-

Hold her Miss K, she falling. Jumbie got her. Don't let me catch you going to the voodoo dances. People go into trances and fall down and you got to hold them down. Miss K is the obeah woman, she does hold them down and put cloth between they teeth to stop the fits. They always get better afterwards.

-There, there. I'm holding your hand. Open your eyes. That's it. Keep

them open. Look at me and try and remember what is happening to you. Don't close your eyes. Open them. You must wake up.-

-They finished the x-ray?-

-This isn't the x-ray. That was yesterday. You must try to wake up now. You're delirious, hallucinating. Look I brought you a card, and a present. Do you like anemones?-

-Flowers.-

-Yes, they're very English, like me. I'm from Henley, you know, where they have the regatta. I was born there, lived there all my life before coming to London two years ago.-

-I died again and was born too.-

-Hush. Try and talk sense.-

-My husband was born here. I had his baby. I remember having a baby.-

-He came but you were sleeping. He went away but he'll be back.-

When Mother was dying, her sister-in-law kept wanting to see her although they hated each other. *Miss K says your enemies have to come and pay their respects to you when you are dying so you will not blow a bad breeze on them.*

-It's the anaesthetic and painkillers. You've had a lot of both. You're drugged. It'll wear off in a day or two. I'll wash your face. Here. Is that good?-

-Yes. Again. My neck too.-

-Turn over, I'll do your back.-

I was an infant. We are all bathing together, girls and women and babies. It's the old logie village. Lily is holding me. She is stooping. I am naked, on her knee. She is drenched in her dress and she is pouring calabashfuls of water over me. This is the bathhouse over the river. It's a small weather-beaten hut on a platform made of large wooden planks. All the women come here to bathe together with the children. When they want to bathe naked they go into the hut and I can see them soaping themselves there. White soapsuds trail along their bodies. They pour water over each other. I am taken there to be soaped then brought out again to be rinsed clean. There are several buckets of water and everyone dips into them. Lily lifts me high into the air and I can see the huge trees of the forest around us as the women take turns to fill the buckets. The ritual of washing goes on for a very long time. It is the earliest memory I have of myself now, now that I am born again.-

* * *

-They're all black this morning. I don't want no black hands touching me.-

-Which one of you said that? Which one of you?-

-She is awake. Look she is awake. Someone tell her to mind her tubes.-

Open your eyes or they will kill you. Open your eyes. Oh miracles. I am alive. Look, they have moved me back to the original ward. All the same

women I found in the first day. Why don't they leave me in one place?

-Nurse, can I have the back rest raised please?-

-I don't know if you can be moved. That is not my job. I have to ask the staff nurse and she is not here. They have left me, an auxiliary, in charge! Can you imagine it? What is this place coming to I ask you? Supposing one of you has a stroke or a heart attack? You see me here? I am extremely angry! I object entirely to this. So you all had better not aggravate me with your racism! You are not too sick to be racist! I don't want black hands touching me indeed!-

She storms away. The white patients grimace to each other. There is war.

-I don't want black hands touching me.-

-Who's saying that? Was that you?-

-Was it me saying what?-

-I don't want black hands touching me - who is saying that?-

They are all silent. The ward is waiting in suspense. She returns with three more black auxiliaries, and she is still complaining loudly about being left in charge of the ward. She is telling them that one of the patients said that they did not want black hands touching them and she would like to find out which person said that because whoever said it was not going to get so much as a drop of water from her or a bedpan, nothing, and that one over there that woman there wanted to get up because her back is hurting her and whoever wanted to take responsibility for lifting her could do so.

All the patients are saying nothing. The nurse is waiting for them to say something, for one of their number to take the racist to task, but no one is owning up.

-You want to be lifted?-

This nurse does not look capable of lifting anyone - she is so thin.

-Well I don't want to be any trouble but I can't bear the pain. One more day of lying on my back will kill me. But I don't want to kill you either. I can't move myself.-

-Is all right. Come. I will just adjust these tubes and come to your right. Now you do exactly as I tell you, you understand?-

She has a West Coast accent. Guyanese voice, pure Guyanese voice.

-Your accent, you have to be Guyanese.-

-That's right. How you know? You are Guyanese too?-

-Yes.-

-I come from West Coast. You know West Coast. That is the other side of the Berbice River.-

-I know the West Coast. My auntie used to live in Belle Vue.-

-I am from Belle Vue. What was your auntie name?-

-Johnson, Imelda.-

-I don't know her, must have been before my time.-

-She only lived there a few years.-

-Come let me help you up. Slowly now, I holding you. Don't move too fast. Come forward, come forward. Good. You glad to get up eh? You been

lying down a long time girl.-

-Lord, this is a blessing. Thank you.-

-Where it's hurting?-

-Here, here.-

-Is the muscle you know from lying on it all the time. Gone stiff. Rub it, you must rub it. You have anything to rub it with? Any tiger balm? Sacrool? Limacol? You know the things we use at home? They are good for muscle pain. What about your tummy?-

-Marjorie! Don't bother to play doctor with that patient!-

-You hear her? She is in one bad mood today. All the white student nurses gone on strike today.-

-You not going on strike too?-

-We going this afternoon, take turns, but they didn't organize the thing properly so all the student nurses and staff nurses went this morning.-

-You are an auxiliary?-

-Yes, but I did my exams and passed. You o.k now? You want to lie down again?-

-I want to stay up. Please fix my pillows so I could stay up.-

-What about your tummy? How that feeling?-

-Bad.-

-Never mind. You will get better. Don' go falling down now. I have to go now, there is a very sick old lady in the back bay.-

-What language is she speaking?-

They are talking to me. *Don' let me catch you talking to white people.*

-You're speaking to me? Are you speaking to me?-

-Yes. My name is Francoise. What is yours?-

-Sylvia.-

-I have hysterectomy but I have ovaries. I am glad. Have they given you replacement hormones?-

-I don't know.-

-You talk much in your sleep. You talk so much all the time. We all listen and feel so sorry for you. You call for your mother. But the young nurse Joanna looks after you good. She comes in often to see you. She sits by your bed and she holds your hand and talk to you. When she is here you wake up little talk to her. Your husband, children have been but you slept when they came. Can you understand my English? Many do not.-

-Yes I understand you.-

-These black nurses, they are so angry. The one you talk to first, she is worst, terrible. The one that lift you, she is nice. I hope the white nurses come back. The black ones don't like we white ones. You are all right. You are from their country. You can talk to them. I don't understand them.-

-You can understand them if you want to. Is it you who said that terrible thing?-

-No, no, no. Not me!-

Now the other women are complaining. The woman in the corner says

she is from Cornwall. She is clutching her belly and looking very glum.

-Just wait until the sisters and doctors come back. I am not putting up with this.-

-It's not right, is it?- This is the grey haired woman in the opposite corner. -In all my twenty years of coming to this hospital, and I have had my children here, I have not had to put up with anything like this. She is like a one-woman-army that auxiliary.- Her eyes look keen and gentle and wise. Her bedside is decorated with flowers, baskets and pots and vases of fresh, glorious flowers. -Which of us would dare say such a thing?-

-They are very aggressive.- Francoise is lying under her own duvet, beside her table full of perfumes, body creams, makeup, and matching gold hairbrush, comb and mirror. She is reading Shirley Maclaine's autobiography. Francoise is beginning to complain. She wants a piece of toast. She is going to get it. Sally is advising her not to do it.

Now, another patient is complaining about the noise. She is a tiny woman, with skin almost as white as milk, black hair and very blue eyes. She looks frightened and ill. How clever your children are, her neighbour was telling her, how articulate. She says that is because I am a teacher and I believe that children should not be repressed.

-I will ring the bell for Marjorie, the tall black one. She always comes. Not like the others.-

-Francoise I would wait till she's seen to the old lady. She is very hard pressed.-

-The wind is so bad, I must have my toast. I have been calling all morning. I can't stand the wind anymore. I am going to cry. I feel awful. I will phone my husband. He must come. I want him to bring me some smoked salmon.-

She rings the bell. No one comes. She rings again and the youngest nurse comes. She does not come to Francoise directly but stands in the aisle with her hands on her hips.

-Who rang?-

-I need some toast desperately.-

-Didn't they give you some this morning?-

-I could not eat it this morning. You know how it is. I could only sip some tea now there is room for toast. Please make me some.-

-You are an unreasonable person you know. I have never met a patient like you. Every minute you want attention. What is the matter with you?-

-The matter is I am very sick. All of us. Look at us. You are very hard.-

Beatrice is calling the auxiliary away. -Helen you leave them right there and come and help me here. If they strong enough to say they don't want black hands touching them then they strong enough to look after themselves.-

Sally shakes her head. -That isn't right you know.-

The door opens. Two white nurses enter. Beatrice begins to complain bitterly to them. She voices her grievances but they say nothing at all to her. When the sister enters the ward with the staff nurse Beatrice goes to them

and voices her grievances again. They take her to the office.

Now Francoise presses her buzzer twice before the Guyanese nurse, Marjorie, comes to her bed.

-Why did you take so long to come? Why are you people so cruel?-

-Why are you talking to me like that? What is the matter with you? Who you calling cruel? You people too damn bareface you know.-

-All morning I rang and no one came. You are all the same.-

-Look here, don't talk to me like that. What do you want? I know what you are trying to do. You want to get me into trouble with Sister. Why you pick on me? Why you pick on me? Just because I was the one who used to run every time you call? Well I not running when you call no more because you can never be satisfied. The more I come the more you call. Don't bother call me anymore.-

Francoise rings the bell again. One of the white nurses come, and she turns down the request for toast and walks away.

-Fucking English bastard, I wish I had gone to a private hospital. These fucking English bastards are such shits. And those black ones, I don't want them touching me.- She whispers so low, it is not possible for anyone else to hear her.

It was she who said it. -You said it, you said you didn't want black hands touching you. You are the one.-

-Yes, I said it. I don't care.-

She gets to her feet, clutches her belly, and limps to Sally's bed. Now They groan to each other about their lack of appetite, their wind, water and motion.

One of the white nurses calls Francoise for her wash. Not one nurse but all four white nurses go to Francoise's bed to wash her. They draw the curtains, admire her hair, skin, perfumes, creams and silk pyjamas.

-I will tell you how to get skin like mine,- Francoise is saying. -Almond oil, use almond oil every time you bath. Try my perfume, go on, go on, there, isn't it lovely?-

-Your hair is beautiful.- They are touching her, caressing her. -How lovely your skin is Francoise, I wish I could afford your perfume, not on my nurse's pay.-

Discipline was gone, there was a nurses' strike – unheard of in England in 1988, not enough nurses to go round, no more towels or dressing gowns, sheets and blankets threadbare, floors not clean, curtains faded and frayed. How cosy and quiet the ward becomes while Beatrice the black auxiliary left in charge fights in the office.

Lunch comes and when Francoise is given her tray, she complains in a loud voice. She sends hers back and goes to the fridge for her high fibre white bread, Polish smoked ham, wine and Swiss chocolates. While she is eating her lunch, the doctor and staff nurse come to her bed.

-Have you been using your own suppositories?- The doctor asks her.

Francoise admits she has been using her own medicine, a laxative,

something organic.

-You are not supposed to do that,- the Staff Nurse says.

-I can't stand the suppositories.-

-You have to leave the hospital.-

-You can't make me leave the hospital.-

-I will send for the doctor immediately.-

It is a woman doctor who comes. She is arguing with Francoise: you have broken all the rules, there is nothing we seem to be able to do for you, we have other patients waiting for beds, I think we can discharge you.

-No, I am not well enough to go home.-

-I am sorry, please phone your husband and ask him to collect you now.-

-Now? Now? -

-Yes.-

-But he just left!-

-I am sorry but you have to go.-

Francoise is sobbing, -Bloody English bastards, bloody English bastards. You are all racists. Nobody understands me when I speak, your food is awful, you are all so cold, why don't you talk to the patients, why don't you understand?-